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Do Llamas Fall in Love?

33 Perplexing Philosophy Puzzles

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SOMEONE ELSE WILL ...

Jobs are not easy to come by in Little Rock, out in mid-West America, so imagine how pleased Goodman was when offered employment by the local sheriff. His luck was on the up – or so he thought, until the sheriff said a little more.

‘You see,’ said the sheriff, ‘what we really need is a professional hangman. You’re ideal for the job, in view of your skill with ropes and knots and shortly, I hope, nooses.’

Goodman gulped. Yes, he wanted a job – he had a family to support – but unlike so many of Little Rock’s citizens, the Little Rockeans, he was opposed to hanging. He was a man of principle, at least on this matter.

‘No, I really can’t take the job,’ stammered Goodman. ‘It’s a pity, but I’m deeply opposed to the death penalty. It’s as simple as that.’



‘Look,’ replied the sheriff, ‘I respect your view – though it’s not mine – but if you don’t take the job, I’ll have to offer the position to someone else. Someone else will do the hanging. So, what have you achieved by your refusal?’

‘Steadfastness to principle,’ replied Goodman, with a sad expression, wondering how to break the news to his family that he had rejected employment so well-paid.

‘That’s not much of a principle, if it makes you look so sad,’ beamed the sheriff. ‘Anyway, what of your other principles – your duties such as feeding and educating your children?’

‘I know, I know. Principles clash; but there are some things I cannot bring myself to do. Before and after the hangings,

I'd have nightmares. They'd show me how morally wrong it would be.'

'That's just a psychological problem of yours, Goodman; but your duty is to your family – and, to repeat, if you don't take the job, someone else will get it. Nothing is gained by your standing high and mighty on principle. In fact, between you and me, I really want you for the job as I know that you'd treat those awaiting execution humanely, whereas the other contender for the job, Badman, would taunt the prisoners as well as eventually hanging them pretty painfully. That's another reason for you to accept. Come on – take the job!'

Should Goodman go against his principle and take the executioner's job?

'Someone else will, if I do not' is often an attempted excusing factor both for doing what we think that we ought not to do and for failing to do what we think we ought. For example: a woman has fainted on the railway platform; we are in a rush; 'Well, someone else will look after her,' we reflect, as we dash by.

What should we advise Goodman to do? Looking at the dilemma solely in terms of consequences – outcome – regarding overall benefits, Goodman, it would seem, should accept the sheriff's offer. It would help his family; it would make things not quite so bad for those on death row. Those factors should outweigh his discomfort. He may even feel

good about himself, something of a martyr, in overcoming his principle.

True, other factors could be cast into the calculation, factors pointing to the opposite conclusion: for example, Badman may have an even bigger family to support.

So far, our reasoning has been directed at likely consequences. For further example, if Goodman's declining the job would lead others to reconsider their support for the death penalty, aiding its eventual prohibition – and were the prohibition to lead to a more flourishing society – then, still on consequential grounds, Goodman would be right in his refusal. But let us assume that, on straightforward consequential grounds, it would be better for Goodman to accept the sheriff's offer. Could anything still be said in support of Goodman's refusal?

This is where we may focus on what sort of person Goodman wants to be, and how integral his principle is to his life. Could Goodman live with himself, live with his conscience, if he allowed himself – as he sees it – to dirty his hands by being executioner? Perhaps staying faithful to his principle, regardless of overall consequences, carries its own moral weight.

An immediate response is that Goodman, in declining the job, is being selfish, putting his own sense of moral well-being above helping his family. Yet is that a fair riposte? Can morality demand that Goodman sacrifice his integrity? Goodman has to live with himself. Perhaps that factor,

though – of what makes for Goodman’s flourishing life – could simply be entered into a more nuanced consequentialist calculation, with Goodman’s sense of integrity given extra weight.

* * *

The above consequentialist approach to morality rests on a detached perspective, a perspective that stands outside Goodman’s particular circumstances. It seeks objectivity, taking into account the effects of the proposed action on Goodman, on the prisoners, on Badman, and so forth. Now, Goodman may picture himself lacking certain attachments – he becomes un-swayed by his wife, blind to images of hanging victims – but his decision and resultant action needs, it seems, the motivational *oomph* of his actual feelings, worries and concerns. One question, then, is whether morality, understood as totally detached, could ever provide that *oomph*. That apart, morality, it may be argued, demands special regard for certain attachments Goodman has – his loyalties, relationships and what matters to him.

Goodman, in making his choice over the job, is making himself. His motivation may arise from his seeing himself as a man of firm principle against the death penalty, or as a man devoted to his family such that he will sacrifice certain principles for that family. In taking the job, though, he could be accepting himself as a hypocrite or coward, unprepared to uphold his principle.

What moves Goodman, and what should move all of us, are our projects and what we see as giving moral sense to our lives. 'Someone else will, if I do not' should carry little weight when we consider how we ought to live our lives.


Similarly, 'Others do it, so I'll do the same' also ought to carry little weight. Consider how some parents lie about their religious faith or their home address in order to get their children into the better school: 'Well, everybody else does.' Insurance claimants over-claim with similar attempted justification. That others do is not sufficient to shield us from condemnation or praise, for we have still chosen to be that sort of person who does as others do.



Where does this leave us over Goodman and the job offer? Well, we can discuss with Goodman; we can draw attention to factors unnoticed. In the end the decision is his. He has to live with what he decides. He ought not to expect a detached answer which he must follow as a puppet follows the pull of the strings, the puppet being no agent, no person, at all. Of course, he could choose to behave *as if* a puppet; but that also is then his personal choice.

When important dilemmas arise, such as our dilemma for Goodman, there is a lot to be said for D. H. Lawrence's injunction, 'Find your deepest impulse and follow it.' Mind you, reflecting on some people and their deepest impulses,

there is also a lot to be said for not recommending such action.

3. THE VIOLINIST: SHOULD YOU UNPLUG? 

**24. EXEMPTIONS: DOCTORS, CONSCIENCE
AND THE NIQAB** 

**33. MINDFUL OF BARBARIANS – WITHIN
AND WITHOUT** 

**8. GOING FOR COVER – FROM ARMS
DEALING TO CASTING COUCHES** 